

## 5. ON THE FOOD HABITS OF CORMORANTS IN THE BREEDING SEASON

Every year a good number of Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax* sp.), Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), and Anhingas (*Anhinga melanogaster*) assemble in the trees within the Calcutta Zoological Gardens for nidification. Night Herons seem to be permanent residents while cormorants and anhinga frequent the garden only during breeding season. The cormorants begin to assemble in the beginning of May. The population attains a peak during the breeding months from June to September. By the end of October most birds leave although some are seen even in early December. We had the opportunity of examining the nest loads of dry fish and stomach contents of young birds when a few branches had to be cut down, thus bringing down hundreds of nest and young ones.

On the basis of this examination it is evident that the birds consume a lot of fish which forms their main food during the season. The following fishes could be identified.

1. *Tilapia* (67% of total)
2. Major carps (27% of total)
3. *Ophicephalus* (6% of total)

Very small fishes were found in the crops of very young birds. The biggest fish brought were in the weight range 23-32 gm.

The highest values of weight are given below :—

<i>Tilapia</i>	31 gm.
<i>Labeo rohita</i>	27 ,,
<i>Ophicephalus</i>	32 ,,

These data show that *Tilapia* forms the major item of consumption during breeding season perhaps because this species is plentiful and is a surface-dweller. It is well known that tilapia breed at a very rapid rate so that ultimately we have a very large number of very small fish which are not of marketable size. Various schemes have been suggested for weeding out its excessive number. In nature cormorants may act as such balancing agents.

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